

Life and the Bell-Shaped Curve

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Being in academe, I'm well-acquainted with the rationale for grading on a curve—i.e. letting grades describe the performance of a particular group of individuals in relation to each other rather than letting grades describe performance in relation to an absolute yardstick of truth. Statisticians tell us the bell-shaped curve proves to be the cosmic shape of our collective abilities. A whole lot of us are average, a few are exceptional, and a few are, well, sorry folks. It's the way we keep everyone's self-esteem in tact—sort of. With no absolute standards, we can always make sure that a few get A's and only a few flunk and the rest are in that vast middle of "acceptable." We chuckle at Garrison Keillor's descriptor that Lake Wobegon, his imaginary town, is a place where "all the children are above average."

But what do the bell-shaped curve or statistical probabilities have to do with Life? Who grades Life anyway?

Actually, we all do. "Life is good," or "Life isn't fair" or "This sucks" pass our lips many times in a lifetime—even, in a year. And yet, grading Life is tricky. Yesterday's joy is today's sadness. That the sun was out yesterday was cause for great celebration in the neighborhoods—roof deck parties, yard sales, walks in the park, sandals and shirtsleeves. But when the rain and grey return today and we must bundle up and dodge puddles again, we feel cruelly taunted by the taste of sun and warmth the day before.

Or take success: success in relation to what? How does one grade success: by the salary one earns? By a word of praise or judgment from a colleague, family member, or friend? By some inner feeling? I remember thinking, "If only I could publish a book." When I did, I found myself asking: what about a second? When the second one was done, yes, the same incessant question came: what about a third? What about one that is published outside the confines of academe? With every move I make, my position on the elusive arc of success keeps shifting. And there are always the Kathy's and Betsy's out there who, in one sentence, or with one more honor, easily jostle my perceived place on that arc.

Let's throw away the dammed curve, the measures, the standards so readily internalized. Who needs a grade for life? Or, what if we took the moment's joy and freely given kindnesses as the better measures of our days?